

*On 22-23 April 2010, Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education, hosted a Higher Education Summit in Cape Town. In advance of this event, the following article by UCT Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price was published in the Pretoria News, The Star and the Cape Times.*

## **Is there a place for ‘race’ in a university selection policy?** **By Dr Max Price, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town**

This Thursday and Friday, Dr Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, is calling key stakeholders together in Cape Town for a summit on higher education. One of the major topics of discussion will be the goal of increasing access to higher education through universities’ admissions policies. A key question will be whether race can be used as a criterion in admissions policy.

The best arguments against the use of racial categorisation are based on a commitment to nonracialism, viz. the need to move our society away from thinking in apartheid categories and from seeing the world through racial lenses. A ‘race’ based policy also reinforces paternalistic relationships between the different population groups and is arguably particularly harmful to the self esteem and confidence of black students. Furthermore it results in all black students being viewed as having benefited from affirmative action even though many have been admitted simply on academic merit. This is frequently resented by black students themselves.

The second key argument against ‘race’ as a criterion is that it disadvantages white students. A selection policy should recognise ability and hard work, and should not exclude a bright white student in favour of a black student who has achieved far lower marks *solely* because the latter is black.

These are the reasons why, in the long term, we ought to move away from a ‘race’ based policy. We should only accept it in the interim if there is no better solution and only if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. In my view, this is the case.

Implicit in the objection to using ‘race’ is the belief that performance in the school leaving exam is the only fair basis for rationing admission opportunities. In other words, it is unfair to prefer an applicant who has achieved 60% over one who has achieved 70%. But anyone familiar with the school system will know that the difference between students’ performance in a national exam has much more to do with the school they went to and their socioeconomic status and the conditions under which they live and learn. The reason for this is not hard to fathom. For a student at a township school with no school laboratory or library, poorly qualified teachers and many missed days of teaching; and living in a shack or RDP house, sharing a room with several other children and adults, no books at home, no computer or internet access, no parent with a matric to help with homework, not speaking English at home yet learning and writing matric in English, no extramural music or art lessons and minimal exposure to museums, shows and travel – for such a student to overcome those odds and get 60% in the Grade 12 exam requires a degree of motivation, commitment and raw talent that far exceeds the average Model C or independent school student who has the cards stacked in her/his favour – including extra private lessons when marks slip. In fact, if talent is randomly distributed in the population, as I believe it is, the fairest way to select students would be simply to take the top 10% of the matric class in every school, regardless of how the relative marks of those top decile students rank against those from other schools – the only condition being that all must exceed a minimum threshold which predicts success at university.

Fairness therefore demands that we do not consider marks on their own but that we moderate marks by also taking into account the obstacles a student has overcome in achieving those results.

There are various ways of doing this. One could design weights to be applied to the marks for different school systems. However, this does not take into account that even within a given school system (e.g. in former Model C schools), there will be children with widely varying degrees of disadvantage that affect their school performance.

Another approach would be to have a test that measures academic potential uncontaminated by life opportunities and select those with equal potential to succeed. Such a test has been the holy grail of those who research selection policy – not only because it may be fairer, but because it would enlarge the pool of candidates that could be drawn into university education with a high success rate. While such reliable tests still elude us, even if they existed they could not stand alone,

since success at university will always be dependent on mastery of certain subjects to the necessary level. Moreover, fairness would require that motivation and hard work should surely count as well.

Another method, which recognises both potential and personal effort, is to put students with comparable degrees of disadvantage into separate baskets and select the top performers *withineach* basket.

Accepting that disadvantage finds a place in the selection process, why should this translate into 'race'? Statistically, 'race' is a good proxy for disadvantage, reflected by the close correlation between 'race' and class – i.e. given South Africa's history most black people are still relatively poor, and vice versa. Most black students attend inferior schools. However, more than that, we are not talking only about poverty and the quality of the school attended, but particularly about 'intermediate determinants' of educational disadvantage. These are factors such as home language, parents' education and their ability to support their children's learning, how early in life one started with educational toys and a stimulating environment, the aspiration inculcated from an early age that one would go on to university after school and the self confidence, ambition and scholastic success that this engenders, and a myriad of other subtle influences. These intermediate determinants also affect most of our current cohort of black students (born c. 1990) from wealthy families at independent schools, as a result of which they generally do not perform as well as their white classmates. Clearly this reflects differential background opportunities and support which signals ongoing educational disadvantage. 'Race' as a criterion therefore captures the *history* of disadvantage, which has a current impact not measured through household income and school. Thus the legacy of disadvantage will probably be present for at least two generations after 1994. The use of 'race' to privilege black middle class students from private schools in most cases compensates for ongoing educational disadvantage (the intermediate determinants) in the absence of which many of these students would have performed better. It effectively gives recognition to potential and to obstacles overcome and is not, therefore, unfair to their white classmates. The proportion of black applicants that are *not* affected by that historical, trans-generational disadvantage is so small that very few black applicants are gaining an undeserved advantage. Ideally we should have a measure of disadvantage which measures not only current household income and school attended, but also the many intermediate determinants of school performance. This is complex. At UCT we are researching such measures and hope in time that they will replace 'race'. The effort is necessary because of our commitment to nonracialism.

There are also white students – a small proportion of white applicants – who are from poor households, or who have attended poor schools, or whose family backgrounds have adversely affected their school performance. They too need to be treated fairly by a selection process.

Finally, we believe it is important to seek out black students from relatively privileged backgrounds because of the impact their likely success has on the stereotypical perceptions. When these students have high pass rates, are more fluent in English, are more engaged in classroom debate, do not need bridging programmes – in short are indistinguishable from other strong students – they are powerful role models. By contrast, if almost all black students selected were from disadvantaged schools, they would feed the stereotype, held often by both black and white students, that black students perform poorly, or need extra support. Destroying such racist stereotypes can only be achieved if there are significant numbers of black students who do well. It justifies selecting black students from privileged schools who might not be selected in such large numbers if selected only on marks achieved in public exams in competition with their white counterparts.

I do not dispute that policies using race *or* disadvantage will reduce the number of white students gaining entry. But we must not forget the context in which white students still currently have access to higher education. I would venture the observation that any reduction in opportunities for white students as a result of affirmative action is not nearly as great as it would be if the school system were fixed and there were half a million more qualified black applicants competing for the same number of university places. We need to recognise where the primary unfairness is.

Our graduation ceremonies are visible examples of the success of the current inclusion of race in our selection criteria as the best students from all 'races', from vastly different backgrounds - many of whom would never have been accepted into university - make their way onto the podium and leave to make their mark on society.

This is transformation.

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